

South Haven One Book, One Community

Discussion guide for Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

There is NO ONE WAY to think about a book!

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* challenges readers with its unreal futuristic world, undefined setting and time line, and its characters whose actions puzzle each other as well as the reader. Written in the 1950's the plot can disturb us with the accuracy of some of its predictions about technology's role in isolating humans from each other.

Unlike most of the other characters (including his own wife) the protagonist Guy Montag grows through his relationship with others. His meeting with his neighbor Clarisse appears to start him on his road to change, although he later realizes an earlier meeting with Professor Faber had begun this transformation.

A major character Fire Chief Beatty hoards a large collection of books and admits to having at one time loved reading. He can quote from literature but says he now has no need for it. His life journey is the opposite of Montag's. Readers might be tempted to skip the author's "Afterword." Don't! In it the characterization of Beatty adds new dimension to the original story.

What questions does this book raise for readers today?

1. As Faber points out, it's not books as such that are being destroyed, but it's what's in them. If this book were written today would it be only books that would be burned? How else or what other methods would be needed to restrict knowledge?
2. How is technology replacing human relationships? The "family" in *Fahrenheit 451* is projected on the wall and its "members" spend most of their time arguing and fighting. How does this reflect the world today?
3. Is reading essential to knowledge or is reading becoming an "educational luxury" like art and music. Today everyone knows a little about art and music but most do not produce or use it daily. Will reading become this same kind of "elective?"

4. Faber points out that the role of firemen in burning books really became unnecessary as “the public stopped reading of its own accord.” The burnings had become entertainment. How can this entertainment be compared to earlier forms of public spectacle – the Roman gladiators, public hangings, witch burnings, beheadings, etc.? Do spectacular punishments end criminal behavior? Does burning end books and ideas?

5. Faber warns Montag about “the most dangerous enemy to truth and freedom...the terrible tyranny of the majority.” Where do we see this “terrible tyranny” functioning today?

6. Conflicting opinions are burned in this futuristic book? How do we treat differing opinions or those who express them today?

7. War appears to be an ever-present threat in *Fahrenheit 451* yet it's a war with little impact on the residents except noise. War is fought by OTHERS. What can you see as a parallel to this, both now and in the past?

8. In not-so-subtle ways the novel draws a distinction between city and rural life and their place in freedom of thought and knowledge. Is this the way we see the world today or is it the exact opposite – do we tend to picture knowledge as urban and ignorance as small-town or rural? Do our concepts of red and blue states fit into this picture?